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ABSTRACT

Summarizes the theoretical foundations, data collection procedures, and findings from a study designed to examine the linkage between presidential cognition and the ultimate framing of organizational change on a community college campus. The data analyzed in this study was gathered at two community college sites intentionally selected based on the presence of a new institutional leader, since campus change often occurs after the hiring of a new college president. Individual interviews were the primary means of data collection in this study with the results based on information gleaned from 28 different interviews. In addition to the presidents, the researcher interviewed members of the president's cabinet, faculty, department chairs, deans, and information directors. Findings from this research analysis uncovered two main themes. First, leader cognition drives not only the choice of change goals, but also the strategies used to implement these goals. Second, while the underlying meaning schemas of leader cognition remain stable, ongoing learning is incorporated into the president's framework and schema to adjust to new experiences and interactions with followers. (Contains 29 references.) (RC)

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The Impact of Presidential Cognition on Framing Organizational Change

Despite calls for leadership throughout the institution, college presidents still fill the most critical leadership position on campus and act as the drivers for institutional change. Research on organizational change highlights the role of the college president in successful change initiatives (American Council on Education, 1998; American Council on Education, 1999), with the impetus for change initiated by external factors, a campus crisis, or by the instigation of the college leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000). While the role the president plays is acknowledged as important in change initiatives, it is less known what contributes to how the president formulates and prepares to lead identified changes on campus.

This study continues the line of inquiry of Neumann (1995), Kezar and Eckel (2001), and others investigating leaders' roles in framing organizational change. Community colleges provide a relevant foci for investigation of the impact of leaders' thinking on change initiatives since the three-prong mission of two-year colleges of preparing college students for transfer to four-year baccalaureate institutions, providing vocation training, and meeting community needs presents an ever-changing and uncertain environment (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community colleges are poised to make rapid changes to their curriculum to meet changing business and community needs, and must now also address the larger educational issues of assessment, learning styles, and operating with constrained resources. Hence, how community college presidents present change to their campus community presents an opportunity to better understand the influence of leader cognition on change.

During site visits to two community college campuses to investigate the processes their college presidents used in framing change initiatives and communicating new goals, it became apparent leader cognition was the driving force behind presidential choices. It was possible to

envision the same presidents establishing similar goals and employing the same strategies to obtain those goals if they were relocated to another campus. As a result of this finding, the research data was examined with the intent of learning more about how leader cognition influenced both the focus of change and the chosen strategies to fulfill the goals of change. Specifically of interest were the elements of cognition that aided the presidents in deciding on change initiatives.

How presidents present change initiatives to campus members often depends on how they understand the situation themselves (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Leader cognition involves this initial level of comprehension for the college president. In turn, how leaders make meaning for themselves impacts the meaning they make for the rest of the campus (Amey, 1992). Neumann (1995), using constructivist theory of reality, found that framing by leaders of a situation results in different meaning making by campus members. Framing involves the choice of one set of meaning(s) over another by the president (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). More recently, Kezar and Eckel (2001) studied institutions undergoing transformational change and noted that leaders facilitated sensemaking by campus members through a variety of communication forums. The research reported here investigated the linkage between presidential cognition and the ultimate framing of organizational change on campus.

Theoretical Framework

In investigating how community college presidents use their cognitive powers to present change initiatives on campus it was useful to consider the influence of culture and sensemaking. Culture provides the medium for the creation and sustainability of organizational reality (Birnbaum, 1991; Morgan, 1997), while sensemaking serves as the mechanism that guides

individuals through times of change and ambiguous situations (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Weick, 1995).

In situations of uncertainty, campus members turn to their leaders for direction. Leaders act as "sense-givers" (Thayer, 1988) and serve as interpreters of ambiguity in the organization. "The actions and utterances of leaders frame and shape the context of action in such a way that the members of that context are able to use the meaning thus created as a point of reference for their own action and understanding of the situation" (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Thus, how the campus leader directs change efforts impacts how college members make sense of the change.

Research (Amey, 1992; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1989) suggests that how leaders make meaning for themselves affects how they will make meaning for the organization. If college presidents are serving as the navigators for change for others on campus, how do they in turn make decisions regarding which initiatives to pursue and how to accomplish the change goals? The role of cognition for the college president depends on the number of cognitive frames they use (Bensimon, 1991), if they are an "old" or "new" president (Neumann, 1989), and what type of institution they serve. Bolman and Deal (1997) outlined four organizational perspectives that leaders may use to enact change, including: structural, political, collegial, and symbolic perspectives. These lenses provide different vantage points on how college presidents approach framing change for their institutions.

Social cognition theory and research focuses on individual's interpretations of the social world (Harris, 1994), thus allowing a venue for exploring the role of leader cognition of community college president on outcomes of framing organizational change. "In their intensive review of the social cognition literature, Markus and Zajonc (1985) conclude that schema theory is the most useful and pervasive perspective on the mechanics of social cognition" (Harris, p.

310). Schemas refer to the internal structures by which individuals process incoming information and make sense of it (Markus, 1977). Schemas are the mental maps (Senge, 1990) that allow individuals to orient themselves when faced with new situations, using past understandings and knowledge to better understand current situations. Individuals collect a variety of schemas that serve as cognitive shorthand for quick understanding of a context. For example, when cued with a particular topic like a college president's state of the college address, an individual's "president's speech" schema would include knowledge about the format of the presentation, the auditorium, a podium, an overhead projection system, and the president standing in front of an audience.

Methods

The choice of two community college sites, through purposeful sampling and utilization of the snowball technique, provided the data for this research. The sites for this multiple case studies were purposefully selected (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994) using as the prime selection criteria that a campus had a new leader. New presidents were chosen since any initiatives they employed would be fresh in the minds of informants and for the fact that campus change often occurs with hiring of a new college president. For the purposes of this study, the definition for consideration as a new president was a person who served in that capacity less than five years on the chosen campus. Interviews were conducted in fall, 2001.

The two presidents consisted of one female and one male president. Justine Grant began her presidency at Eastern Community College, a technical college located in the Northeast, in 1999, this was Grant's first presidency. Tom Church left a presidency of a college in the

Midwest to become the president of Central Community College, also in the same state in the Northeast, in 1998. Pseudonyms protect the identities of all participants and their colleges.

The prime source of data collection was individual interviews. Audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each college president was interviewed to obtain a better understanding of not only how they enacted change on their campus, but also the antecedent presidential thought processes contributing to their choice of initial change initiatives. In addition, members of the president's cabinet, faculty, department chairs and deans, and information directors were interviews. A total of 28 interviews were conducted; 15 at Eastern Community College and 13 at Central Community College.

Findings

Findings from this research analysis uncovered two main themes. First, leader cognition drives not only the choice of change goals, but also the strategies used to implement these goals. Second, while the underlying meaning schemas of leader cognition remain stable, ongoing learning is incorporated into the president's framework and schema to adjust to new experiences and interactions with followers.

Captain of the Boat

Not only did leader cognition drive the chosen goals targeted as part of change on each campus, but also the subsequent strategies to implement the goals. Moreover, what the president meant by organizational change influenced how they made meaning of the change and how they in turn framed change for their campuses. Each of the presidents in this research study came to

their campuses with some specific goals of change in mind. In general, the plans for change after the presidents' arrival on campus followed those outlined during the interview process.

Eastern Community College

All change initiatives begun at Eastern Community College supported the singular purpose of increasing enrollment. Since state funding was tied to enrollment figures, President Justine Grant targeted program changes with the ultimate goal of getting more students on campus and increasing credit hours for existing students. Grant was previously a vice president of enrollment and had experience with formulating and implementing a recruitment strategy. At her previous campus, however, enrollment was not a crisis issue. As Grant noted, "We had actually never had enrollment difficulties at my previous college, but we were talking about shaping the enrollment and getting more of some kinds of students." During the interview at Eastern, Grant became aware of the college's serious enrollment concerns.

When Grant reflected on her interview, she noted, "They needed somebody who was positive and who had a lot of energy. Somebody who was really committed to the college and to the community...somebody who had some strong leadership, but also would be willing to be a team player and invite a lot of input." When the president first arrived on campus she spent the first semester listening to campus members and hosting a variety of coffee sessions that included a mixture of personnel. Subsequent to this first semester, Grant presented what she called her Program of Work to the campus at the opening of the spring semester. The plan had eight goals, one of which was growth of enrollment. All other goals, however, supported increasing student numbers on campus.

An outgrowth of the president's plan was an academic program review that resulted in the elimination of 14 programs and the placement of several others "in jeopardy." Grant noted that these actions helped her "because there was a campus-wide buy in that 'Oh! She's really going to do what she said she would do!'"

Grant instituted programs to implement web registration, restructured academic curriculums, and worked with advisors on better counseling techniques for students that resulted in increased enrollment numbers for state reimbursement. She also restructured the reporting hierarchy to install a dean structure to streamline decision-making. Grant's approach to enrollment issues involved using traditional tactics to address enrollment difficulties via methodical means.

One of the Deans at Eastern Community College noted, "I certainly think you would find that there is a dichotomy of opinion on the question of planning. I think some people think they know what is going on and plans are going on about as well as can be expected given that it's hard to plan without having a budget. Others I think either sense there's an absence of planning or more likely believe that not enough people are included in the planning process." Thus, while the inner circle of leadership was aware of the planning process and its features, campus members in general reporting knowing less about the planning process.

Others described Grant as a consensus builder, especially within the leadership cabinet. One vice president did note, however, "I can't remember what the issue was, but it was at a cabinet meeting and I said, 'I'm sorry, but I don't agree with you.' And that upset her because I was the one guy who was outside the circle of the wagon!" When another Vice President talked about how the president made decisions regarding change he commented,

> She likes to throw out new ideas, likes to get feedback and if she has an idea that she thinks is really good, if you say 'No,' she'll ask you a million and one questions. So, if she asks me, 'Should we do X?' and I say no and she doesn't have a vested interest, then she'll say, 'Fine, no problem.' But, if she really thinks, 'No, this is the right thing,' she'll say to me, 'I hear what you're saying about X, but did you look at it in this way?' So we'll go back and forth a half dozen times, a dozen times, and sometimes she will change my mind and sometimes I'll change her mind. But I tease her and say, 'Yeah, but you're going to bring it up in another year or so!

President Grant's main change focus was on increasing enrollment by using a variety of traditional means to accomplish this goal. She had a definite plan in mind about how to accomplish this goal, and while working to build a consensus of how to accomplish change; she was clearly driving change from her perspective.

Central Community College

President Tom Church of Central Community College implemented a laptop computer program as his first campus initiative. During his interview for the presidency he discussed the laptop program and told the campus of his interest in implementing a similar program at Central and that he wanted to start a number of new programs. One of Church's first change initiatives targeted plans for piloting the laptop program with volunteer departments and made resources available for the piloting departments.

Church noted, "The campus faculty were ripe for change, they were ready. They were simply looking for someone to say, 'What should we do?' So, there was a receptiveness to any idea and a willingness to try things." The president noted his interest in technology and computer applications. He said, "I came here prepared to do a lot of that [integration of technology]. I was up front about that." In fact, unbeknownst to Church, a campus team from Central Community College visited his previous campus on a benchmarking trip to evaluate the ThinkPad University initiative Church implemented there.

Church was clear on his goals for the campus and in communicating them to the campus. He said, "My vision involves the integration of technology in the classroom, integration of applied business principles, and an entrepreneurial sort of spirit." He described his strategy of using his presidential position to communicate his goals often to campus members. Still, he candidly commented, "Amazingly, even though a lot of people thought these were nice things [technology goals], they really didn't think they would happen. And it wasn't until some of these things started to happen that the bandwagon became crowded." The president talked about how he used persuasion to obtain buy-in from campus members. Grant noted, "Just because I had the vision I couldn't implement it. I needed to do something before that. I needed to develop a consensus. Consensus is the wrong term. I needed to develop strong support for that from a group of faculty and staff." Thus, instead of trying to obtain total agreement on the vision, Grant sought to obtain enough support to leverage change.

When Church first arrived at Central he initiated campus wide strategic planning sessions. He described these meetings as follows, "The meetings were more effective to try to sort out the problems and to shift through all of the stuff so that the more generally agreed upon ideas surfaced. Then it was my job to put that into context, read it and study it, reorganize it and

then be able to communicate it succinctly and directly." The final product was a plan with seven strategic goals broadly stated and under each of the goals were a set of objectives. The goals and the objectives were subsequently operationalized with specific tasks and deadlines.

When Church talked about what he considered prior to making decisions he noted that he read a lot of periodicals and that he tried to draw parallels between new information and ideas and how they in turn could be implemented at Central Community College. Plans in the works at the college included utilizing products from the college farm in on-campus food services, issuing all students cell phones to use as identification and meal cards, and establishing incubator businesses on campus.

Campus members recalled thinking the president came to campus with a particular change agenda. One faculty member noted, "We got onto that ThinkPad stuff very quickly, so I'm sure that wasn't something that just came spur of the moment to him." One vice president recounted the interview process for the president, "It became obvious that he was a proponent of laptops on campus. And that was one of the first things we did of course...That is entirely his...when I say entirely his, because no one had really gotten into it to that extent prior to Tom coming. So, you know that is a change that he had in mind that he drove. And he drove it by building consensus and he did a pretty good job." Because of Church's familiarity with ThinkPad University, the president used his previous network to speed up the purchase and acquisition of laptops for the faculty and students.

President Church focused on integrating technology across all curriculums and borrowing ideas from business to implement at the college. His vision utilized technical innovations and business practices to build the campus into a "premiere technical campus."

Summary

Each president drew from their past experiences in identifying goals to pursue. Once goals were established, the strategies employed to reach these goals complemented the cognitive styles of each president (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1997). President Grant utilized a very structure oriented strategy, emphasizing the accomplishment of particular steps prior to advancing to the next stage of change to increase enrollment. Her use of traditional recruitment strategies complimented a structural format. President Church, on the other hand, relied more on strategies emphasizing symbolic or cultural mechanisms for change as he implemented the lap top program. He linked his vision for the future of the college with a focus on technology with the early successes of the laptop program. He sought to implement strategies that were at the cutting edge of technology and adopt them to a college setting.

Leader as Learner

College presidents are also adult learners who continue to add to their knowledge foundation and adjust their thinking based on the accumulation of new information. The basis for the underlying meaning schemas for each president in this study was in their past work experience, their preferred means of networking, how they thought about resources, and how they defined change. Each president continued to learn not only from on-campus staff members, but also personnel located in the state's central offices. The feedback received from others allowed each president to adjust their thinking and planning accordingly.

Eastern Community College

President Grant discussed how she began to learn about her new college from advice she received from Art Levine at a conference. Grant related, "He [Art Levine] said to take a significant amount of time to get to know the campus and to do a lot of outreach. So, from August until the end of December I listened. I made the rounds." As noted, Grant instituted a series of presidential coffee sessions to gather various campus members together to enable her to learn more about the campus and to give participants a chance to ask questions. Using this information she formulated her Program of Work and presented it to the campus in the spring of her first year as president.

The experience Grant had in enrollment management guided how she implemented the review of academic programs and the initiation of new programs. One program she implemented was based on connections from her previous college and involved bringing in international students from Jamaica to complete their degrees in Eastern Community College's hospitality program.

When discussing the sources the president drew upon in making decisions about change on campus Grant referred to her network within the state and at other colleges, as well as in her leadership cabinet. The president noted that she had to spend time with both the state and federal legislators representing her district. "I need to pay attention to politics. I need to pay attention to the community....You name the group and I've spoken to them." In drawing upon resources in decision making Grant concentrated on using the political system and its rules to her advantage in getting the most funding possible from enrollment. She focused on the structure of the hierarchy within the state and used the structure itself to advantage the college.

Grant defined change for Central Community College by incremental and discrete steps. She thought about how to position the college through improved enrollment and, given the state context of the college, tried to figure out how best to serve the college's goals by following the rules governing funding in the state system. By viewing change as incremental, the goals and strategies Grant employed on campus followed a similar pattern of discrete steps.

Central Community College

As noted, one of the first actions President Church employed upon moving to Central Community College was the initiation of campus wide strategic planning sessions. The Vice President of Academic Affairs reflected on the sessions and stated, "It [planning for changes] was the involvement with the campus community and the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis and then the major six or seven institutional objectives and then the associated goals and objectives." Many other informants on campus related similar vignettes when describing the planning meetings and the consensus was that there was campus input into the final plan.

Church brought with him from his previous college a desire for infusing technology into campus programs. Drawing from his familiarity with the laptop program implemented during his first presidency, Church used this experience as a framework at Central. Church was able to build on the fact that campus members visited his Midwest campus to investigate the ThinkPad University in place there. He stated, "Not only was this campus open [to starting a ThinkPad University], but so was the state." In fact, the state was investigating using the laptop program across a consortium of two-year colleges throughout the state. Church preempted the joint effort, however, by implementing the laptop program unilaterally at Central Community College.

Contrary to President Grant, President Church did not mention any interactions with representatives from the state central office or with politicians. When asked what resources he drew upon in his decision-making he commented on reading periodicals and drawing parallels. "My background is in automotive design and what I always saw were parallels in what appealed to consumers...we were always dealing with market research and what I'm getting at is that there were parallels in other industries that helped us make decisions." Church saw applications of business practices to college endeavors as one example of transferring programming ideas.

When defining change for the campus Church attempted to draw the attention of the campus on the final vision. The president acknowledged campus problems of deteriorating physical plant and budget concerns, but noted,

> At no point did I dwell on the negatives or really talk about them much...I started working on the new stuff while I was dealing with the other stuff. I guess the message there was that I am trying to get them to take their eyes off the problem all the time and look at where we're headed. Join me and this is where we're going.

For Church, then, change was part of the path to the long term vision of the campus with actions accomplishing movement to attaining the ultimate goal of being a technology infused campus.

Although Church arrived at Central Community College with a vision in mind involving technology, the context of the college influenced how this vision was enacted. In reflecting on the strategic planning process, Church commented, "The first thing I had to do was engage the college in a strategic planning concept or process. From the session these ideas emerged [integration of technology in the classroom], not in purely the way I thought of them, but in expanded ways." Thus, while Church provided the initial framework and direction of using

technology as a focal point of change at the college, the contextual influences from the campus molded the ultimate outcomes.

President Church viewed change as ongoing, with alterations to plans impacted by new information gleaned from his readings that borrowed from business and from input from campus members. He attempted to tie the long range goals of the campus with immediate successes, but ultimately viewed change as long-range versus short term.

Summary

The presidents both reacted to the institutional context in which they found themselves. Unlike contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967), which argues for a certain leader for a particular situation, in this study each of the presidents cognitively adapted their schemas to the context of their presidency. While it can be argued that the initial hiring of the president in fact was an attempt by the board of trustees to match the chosen leader to the context of the campus, once the president arrived on campus he or she became an active learner of the new context. What the college presidents learned entered into their underlying schemas and cognitive maps of leadership.

Discussion and Research Implications

The findings from this research have implications not only for presidents, but also the institutions they lead. Despite the demands for leadership throughout the institution, it is still the college president who takes the lead role in guiding organizational change on campus and framing sensemaking for campus members. Leader cognition plays a pivotal role in identifying

the focus of change and choosing mechanisms for communicating plans for change to campus members. The presidents in this research study conveyed information to others in a manner that was comfortable for them and aligned with their personal preferences of framing change.

The context and culture of the institution served to supply feedback to the college presidents. Both Grant and Church took time to learn more about their institutions through the use of large campus meetings, small group sessions, and walking around their campuses. Ultimately the presidents' interaction with other campus members impacted their cognition and what they learned about the best ways to interact with campus members. The experiential learning of the presidents during the change process in turn altered and added to their schematic understanding of others at the college. "Developing schemas of others is important because their behavior shapes the reality one is trying to understand" (Harris, 1994, p. 312). Moreover, understanding of individuals creates an understanding of the organizational culture.

How the college president in turn uses an understanding of the organizational culture and its campus members then guides the framing choices they make to highlight organizational change. The way in which the president frames change for the campus impacts where campus members focus their attention. Metaphorically the president's frame acts like a picture frame the president uses to showcase a particular initiative for campus attention. The choice of the presidential frame is based on leader cognition and their schematic understanding of the college's culture.

College presidents bring certain life experiences to their new positions. Programming and decisions that worked for them in the past are applied again in their new work situations. If each of the presidents in this study were to lead an institution now led by the other, they would approach organizational change in much the same way as they originally did on their home

campus. Thus, Grant's focus at another campus would be on a systematic approach to current institutional issues, whereas Church's focus would concentrate on incorporating technology into the fabric of the college.

Learning for the college presidents was situated in the context of their institutions. "Sociocultural theories argue that cognition is a social, rather then exclusively individual, process and that the contexts of learning are integral to the learning itself" (Lattuca, 2002, p. 733). Consideration of the leader as learner opens up a new area for research on college presidents. While others have studied community college president development (McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebbers, 1999; Vaughan, 2001), investigations of the learning process for college leaders are not prevalent. The research reported here begins to unearth the role of cognition on presidential decisions regarding framing and presenting information to campus members and how the situated learning of the presidents is impacted by the context of the college.

Since framing by the college president leads to sensemaking on campus it is imperative to have a better understanding of the elements contributing to the ultimate frame chosen by the president. Past experience, resources used in decision making, the role of others, and the presidents' conception of change all lend to defining the ultimate frame chosen by each president. Also critical to framing by college presidents is the situated learning they undergo.

The research reported here dealt with the cognition of presidents of community colleges. Further research needs to occur to discover what, if any, differences are evident when considering the cognition of presidents of four year colleges and universities. The contextual differences between community colleges and four year institutions, the career paths and development of the presidents of the respective institutions, and the faculty roles and student

composition of two-year versus four-year institutions may all impact the intersection of leader cognition and change on these campuses.

Conclusion

Each president was chosen as the best candidate by their campuses to address the institutional issues facing the colleges. The notion of fit, however, also concerns the match between the cognitive schema of the president and the needs of the institution. How presidents conceptualize their leadership and utilize their underlying meaning schemas impacts the creation of the change agendas they formulate to advance the needs of their campuses. Since the meaning of change was different for each of the presidents reported in this study, it is imperative that college search committees have a clear understanding of what a candidate really *means* when they say they support change. Candidates may advocate change, but the ways in which they envision change can have very different meanings for campuses.

Presidents Grant and Church each adjusted their change agendas based on follower feedback. Some of the change to original plans simply meant employing different means of communicating the change to campus members, while other alterations were more substantive. The strategies used to enact the change goals on campus correlate with the ways in which the presidents conceived of the change process. President Grant thought of change as incremental movement following a step-by-step plan, whereas President Church conceptualized change as a longer term vision of creating a premiere technology campus. A mismatch between the president's cognitive orientation and the culture and context of the campus can derail plans for change. Certain cognitive schemas may have the most success in particular situations. For instance, President Church would employ a plan for change based on employing technology in

the initiative in some format and this approach may not always be appropriate given the institution's resources and predilection for infusing technology into the curriculum.

Recognizing presidential learning is important as college presidents and their campuses grapple with change initiatives. Personal reflection is needed for leaders to recognize the role their cognition plays on their actions, but also to alert college presidents of their blind spots and areas that may require additional development. Broader implications on how to structure community college leadership programs, advanced degrees, and training opportunities require research attention and discussion in the literature. Given the predicted leadership crisis in community colleges (Evelyn, 2001) it is imperative to address how to best prepare these future leaders. Part of community college president preparation needs to include a recognition and understanding of how individual cognition impacts the enactment of leadership on two-year college campuses.

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